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New Southern voice: Mindy Friddle scores with well-received first novel

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New Southern voice

Mindy Friddle scores with well-received first novel

For 15 years Cutter Johanson, freckled, smart-alecky and hopelessly old-fashioned, lived in Mindy Friddle's head. When Friddle relocated to her hometown of Greenville in 1991, she stumbled upon a ramshackle Victorian off White Horse Road.

Cutter, she decided, could move easily into the decaying mansion of ragged carpets and water-stained wallpaper. Just like that, Cutter had her home — and Friddle had the setting for a novel.

The Garden Angel, published this summer by St. Martin's Press, is the story of 25-year-old Cutter's fight to save her family's crumbling estate from developers as love triangles and family crises whirl around her. The first novel by Friddle, 40, has drawn an enthusiastic review from *The Washington Post* ("funny, down-to-earth and steeped in a sense of place"), a starred recommendation from *Kirkus Reviews* ("a standout") and a spot on Barnes and Noble's coveted *Discover: Great New Writers* picks for fall.

Friddle, the daughter of alumni Ron Friddle '64 and Kay Vinson Friddle (M.A. '90), writes from muscular powers of observation developed as her military family moved from South Carolina to Germany to Washington, D.C., and back to Greenville in time for her graduation from Berea High. She majored in philosophy at Furman, savoring a senior-year class on women writers taught by professors Jane Chew, Elaine Nocks and Ann Sharp. It introduced her to an eclectic array of authors — international and regional, extravagant and minimalist.

"I think I was soaking it in, which is exactly what you're supposed to do as a Furman student," says Friddle, who graduated in 1986. "Later you process it."

She went on to report for newspapers in the eastern South Carolina towns of Hemingway and Florence, write technical articles for Fluor Daniel in Greenville, and work for a non-profit before landing her current job as on-line newsletter editor



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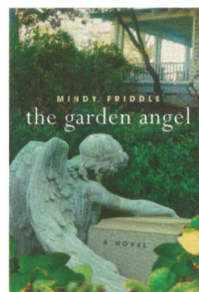
Mindy Friddle has twice won the South Carolina Fiction Project sponsored by the Charleston (S.C.) Post and Courier.

for Ernst and Young. Along the way, she earned a master's degree in teaching from the University of South Carolina and is finishing a Master of Fine Arts degree from Warren Wilson College in North Carolina.

Ironically, *The Garden Angel* was disqualified as her master's thesis when St. Martin's snapped it up for publication. That meant an extra year of school so Friddle could produce another 100 pages of fiction.

One of the beauties of *Garden Angel* is Friddle's description of a once vibrant mill town being swallowed by an invading city:

But on our street, the houses were still standing and faintly grand — gussied up with fish-scale roofs, cupolas, and spires — although our kinfolk and relatives had long abandoned them. . . . Our house sat at the end of Gerard Avenue: coquettish and tattered, on tippy toes, it seemed, from the encroaching world.



Word images are her gift, Friddle allows, just as plot or timing or dialogue may be another writer's. Her other major character is Elizabeth, the agoraphobic wife

of a philandering college professor — who has impregnated Cutter's sister. Reflecting on 12 years of marriage, Elizabeth is described as thinking "of rows of white eggs: smooth, identical, fragile, nestled in hollows of Styrofoam, one egg for each year they'd been together."

Intriguingly, Friddle varies the book's voice, alternating chapters between Cutter's first-person view and a third-person narration by Elizabeth. When Cutter wanders into Elizabeth's chapters, she, too, slips into third-person, as seen through Elizabeth's eyes. It's an ambitious technique, accomplished seamlessly.

Friddle, who shares Cutter's appreciation for "ruined finery," lives in a yellow-shingled house in Greenville's Earle Street Historic District with her second husband, Mike Cubelo, and 14-year-old daughter, Saga. "I just had to have a house with character," she explains. "Quirks and squeaks and glass doorknobs."

But it's the Sans Soucis — like the mill-town area of the same name, just down the road from Furman, which in recent years has undergone an extensive retail makeover — that need to be written about, she believes, for they are most in danger of being consumed by the new South.

"It's funny, because you used to call that whole area Sans Souci," she says. "They call it Cherrydale now. All the realtors say, 'Oh, Cherrydale! You can live in Cherrydale!'"

— Deb Richardson-Moore